

Wheat and weeds

A sermon preached by Revd Dr Mark Butchers at St Peter's Wolvercote on 20th July 2008

Jesus put before the crowd another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain then the weeds appeared as well. And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, "Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?" He answered, "An enemy has done this." The slaves said to him, "Then do you want us to go and gather them?" But he replied, "No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'"

Then Jesus left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, 'Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.' He answered, 'The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!'

Matthew 13.24-30, 36-43

Today's Gospel is a difficult text. It falls into two distinct halves: first the parable of the sown field itself and then its interpretation. The message of the parable itself is a positive one. It paints a picture of an environment where good and bad are interwoven, flourishing alongside each other.

We can apply that to many different circumstances in our world. Terrorist bombings in recent years, for example, are clear instances of the existence of evil in the midst of much that is good. We can apply it to the Church with its mixture of positives and negatives - an institution, which both inspires and frustrates us at different times. We can apply it also to our inner selves: we can recognise that within us there exist competing emotions and desires, some pulling us towards God and some away from him. The wheat and the weeds grow together - that is inescapable.

One of the messages from this parable is that when we think of an institution such as the Church, we are being warned away from being judgemental. It tells us to avoid trying to discern who is good and who is bad, who is in and who is out, who is saved and who is not. There have been attempts to do that in the past. In the seventeenth century there was the Puritan desire to purify the Church, to drive out from it those who were deemed to fall short of certain standards. An interesting article in Theology a few years ago about the Sydney Diocese in Australia suggested that that diocese is gripped by something similar. One feature is that currently it is effectively impossible for divorced or gay or even single clergy, to

be appointed to posts in the diocese.

But such attempts to purify the Church usually end in witch-hunts, persecution and hypocrisy. People fall into the trap of thinking that some are saints and others are sinners, and if only we could get rid of the sinners, the Church would be a better place, a truer reflection of the Kingdom of God. What they forget is that all of us are a mixture.

The parable seems to me to stand against any desire to purify the Church. Instead it says, have patience, it is not for us to make such judgements. On the contrary our Church is called to be an inclusive mixture of people of all kinds, at all different stages on the spiritual journey.

Biologically I imagine it is impossible for a weed to become wheat. And there is certainly no hint in the parable of the idea that people might change from being more weed than wheat to more wheat than weed. Yet such an idea of change or growth does come across in other parts of the Gospel. Jesus changes the direction people are heading in their lives. Think of Zacchaeus, of Mary Magdalene, and of the parables he preaches along those lines: the Prodigal Son, for instance.

This idea of potential change also seems to me to argue for an inclusive Church which accepts people for who they are and welcomes them into an environment where all of us can grow more into God's image. The starting point for that kind of inclusive, welcoming Church is surely the honest recognition that we ourselves are a mixture of saint and sinner, wheat and weed. If we are aware of our own need of God's healing and forgiveness, it is difficult to be judgemental about other people.

So the message I take from the parable itself is a positive one: be aware of the weeds and wheat which grow side by side in us. Allow that to steer us clear of judgemental, exclusive attitudes to other people.

When we turn to the second part of this morning's Gospel reading, the interpretation of the parable, one's heart rather sinks. We encounter real hellfire and damnation stuff. This is one of those passages which has fed a certain strand of Church preaching down the centuries - that for instance of the American theologian, Jonathan Edwards, who said once: "Sinners in the hands of an angry God, God holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you and is dreadfully provoked. You are 10,000 times more abominable in his eyes than the most hateful and venomous serpent is in ours". Note the way he says you and not we. Hellfire and damnation preaching was echoed also in medieval wall paintings, which are a blatant attempt to remind or scare the faithful into being wheat not weeds.

What of course is strange is that this interpretation of the parable is attributed to Jesus, yet it sits so ill with so much else of our picture of him. Did he say to the people who crucified him: you will be thrown into the furnace of fire? "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do." Did he consign the thief on the cross to weeping and gnashing of teeth? "Today, you will be with me in paradise." Did he cast Peter into outer darkness for denying him? "Peter, feed my sheep." The interpretation of the parable attributed to Jesus just doesn't fit; and so I do have to ask whether words have been put into his mouth here by the author of the Gospel.

It has of course been very fashionable over the last 50 years and before to reject all images of hellfire and damnation as incompatible with a God of love. I think this is right, but there is

a danger that we end up with a rather cosy picture of God, a God who isn't particularly bothered by the weeds within us, and who welcomes us into his kingdom exactly as we are, weeds and all. The inevitable consequence of that picture of God is that we cease to be bothered by our inner weeds, and of course they will grow and flourish and take us subtly further from God.

Is it possible to chart a middle way? Avoiding on the one hand a hellfire and damnation God who weighs everyone on the scales and consigns those who don't make the grade to eternal flames. Avoiding on the other hand a God who is so laid back that he turns a blind eye to our sinfulness and welcomes us in just as we are. I think there probably is, and perhaps it might go something like this.

If Jesus is a reflection of the nature of God, the human face of God, we can learn that God is love, acceptance, forgiveness, resurrection, new life. But we also know that Jesus was not afraid to confront people with their sinfulness. He was not afraid to point out the cost of changing direction to move closer to God rather than further away from him. I imagine God in the end time being and doing the same: offering acceptance, forgiveness, new life, yet also confronting us with who we have become, the good and the bad, the wheat and the weeds. That won't be easy or cosy: things won't be swept under the carpet. They will be faced openly and fully in order to be dealt with and healed. It may be that not everyone will feel able to do that; not everyone will choose to submit to that purgative healing process; not everyone will want to let go of their sin and entrust themselves to God. And so for them there will be an ending, not in flames of hellfire, but ceasing to be the personal creatures they are. That will be something of their choosing, not God's imposing. Their choice will be respected by God and they will simply become part of the non-human creation, no longer the personal beings they once were.

We can't know how things will be in that end time, but the picture I've painted seems true to me of what is revealed about God by Jesus' ministry as a whole: an inclusive God, a God of love and forgiveness, not one who consigns to hellfire. Yet still a demanding God, who confronts us with the reality of who we are; a God who takes our goodness and our sinfulness seriously and holds out the offer of a burning love to purge us and heal us.

The only judgement in all this is, to my mind, the decision we will take to say yes or no to that offer. The only fire will be God's love burning away our sin. The only weeping will be our sorrow at the hurt we have caused. But then, as Revelations 21 says, we will be God's people and he will wipe away every tear from our eyes. Death will be no more, mourning and crying and pain will be no more and we will be renewed and included, united with our Creator. Amen.